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ABSTRACT

The end of communist rule in Romania meant that the country's Rroma (Gypsy) population could affirm its ethnic and cultural identity. However, educational opportunities for Rroma children remain low. The following are among the many factors that have led to social exclusion of the Rroma in Romania: existing policy priorities; high unemployment and poverty rates; regional disparities; and configuration and respect of citizenship and human rights. The national program Education for the Second Chance was initiated to combat social exclusion. The program School Development in Rroma Communities Equal Chances for Rroma Children through School and School-Related Activities was started in 1998 and lasted for 3 years. It featured the following components: (1) school management and partnership; (2) intercultural education; (3) cooperative learning; (4) oral histories; (5) remedial teaching; and (5) local community involvement in education and parents' education. The following were among the successful activities conducted within the program's framework: (1) Sunday school for parents; (2) grandfathers' kindergarten (educational activities for preschool children that were initially organized by older adults); and (3) mentoring programs. These initiatives have illustrated how increasing the learning opportunities available to adults can benefit young children and help combat the marginalization and social exclusion of Rroma children and adults alike. (MN)

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1. Problems of rroma population: some considerations regarding education

The difficult situation of rroma population across Europe is a well-known reality, under continuous debate in the last years. Living especially in South-Eastern and central Europe, rroma people were subject to discrimination, marginalization and social exclusion during communist times, but also after 1989, despite the efforts and programs which tried to improve, for instance, the access to education and equal chances for success for rroma pupils, without threatening their identity and culture.

Under the communist regime, authorities officially ignored the rroma population. They have not been recognized as a national minority and they were not present in the official discourse.

One of the main measures of the communist authorities was to stop the travelers and to force them to adopt a sedentary way of life.

The transition to democracy after 1989 had a positive abut also a negative impact on rroma population. The positive one consists in the possibility of reaffirming the ethnic and cultural identity of rroma. Today they are recognized as a national minority and as a distinctive ethnic group. In this quality they benefit from state support in order to develop their own culture and identity, to participate in social life and in political decision making. The negative impact of transition period is linked to economical situation of rroma. The fall of centralized socialist economy and especially of collective farms produced a large number of unemployed.

The situation of education in rroma communities is also very difficult. In a research report produced in 1993 (C.Zamfir; E. Zamfir) is showed that 52 5% of adult rroma population followed only the courses of primary school and 27% of them didn't finalized primary cycle of education. The illiteracy rate is of 44% among adult males and 59% among adult females. In the years after communist period, the general trend is that young generations have a lower education than their parents. If we look for the reasons of this situation, we can invoke:

- Continuous socio-economic decline of rroma population (together with an important part of majority group);
- The lack of constraints imposed by communist regime (rroma ethnic group started a complex process of rebuilding their own identity and culture in the context of 21st century society);
- The idea that schools is an institution which represents the official power and which could threaten the cultural and ethnic identity.

Romania is one of the countries with a large number of rroma, confronted with "internal" problems, related to the construction of their social and cultural identity in the new context, and with "external" problems, regarding their access to social participation, the attitude of majority towards them etc.

In terms of access and participation, educational opportunities for rroma children are still low. If 'equality' is taken in its wider sense of equal access to, equal survival in, equal treatment during, and equal empowerment as a result of education, then Rroma children in Romania are not getting yet their fair share on any of this counts.

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The school attendance and participation in education among rroma remains low, even an important number of initiatives aiming to improve the educational situation of rroma produced already positive results. Main causes seems to be:

- The high expenses demanded by school attendance, especially for families with a large number of children (clothes, educational materials etc.)
- The economic pressure, which made a lot of families to take pupils from school and involve them in different income-producing activities
- The lack of motivation/interest for school specific to an important number of parents.

One of the most important consequences of all those educational problems is the low capacity for social integration of rroma and, because of that, the phenomenon of social exclusion.

2. The phenomenon of social exclusion in Romania: the situation of rroma

The deterioration of economic performances, the delays in restructuring and privatization and the occurrence of the painful consequences of transition have all led to the worsening of living standards and the deepening of social and economic stratification.

In such conditions, as showed in the report *VET against social exclusion* (1999), Romania was not exempted from experiencing the phenomenon of social exclusion, with all its consequences: diminished social cohesion and homogeneity, waste of human resources, instability and social tensions, low social, economic and political participation, especially for 'minority' or 'marginal' groups.

It is already known that social exclusion is the result of a complexity of factors, and we will try to briefly refer to them further on. Before that, an important aspect need to be highlighted and professor Tony Atkinson put it in his Presidential Address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science: "...Social exclusion arises not only on the labor market, but affects many aspects of everyday life. (...) Social exclusion is not the same as poverty...People are excluded not just because they are currently without a job or income, but because they have few prospects for the future".

The main factors producing social exclusion in Romania are the following:

- **Priorities setting**: economic, social and educational policies. As far as education is concerned, tailor made programs for groups at risk were developed only in late 1998. In rroma communities, little has been done in removing cultural barriers in education, training, employment and integration into the mainstream society.
- **Unemployment**: more than 10% from the adult population. The downsizing and/or closure of some enterprises was an other source of social exclusion for rroma: many times they have been the first fired; The lack of job search skills and subsequent failure in identifying job opportunities make people dependent on social assistance provisions.
- **Poverty.** Associated to poverty is the school abandonment or failure, precarious health status, inappropriate housing conditions, marginalization and delinquency.
- **Regional disparities**: underdeveloped areas, risk groups areas etc. When we talk about the situation of rroma, most of the time they belong to risk groups, especially when living in rural areas. On the one hand, the communities made up of individual under risk of social exclusion have a higher poverty rate, reduced rehabilitation opportunities, diminished chances to overcome their difficulties; at the same time, a less developed community, with structural problems or lacking resources cannot ensure for its members the necessary conditions for re-launching.
- **Configuration and respect of citizenship/human rights**: Rroma, handicapped people, sexual minorities. Despite considerable progresses, there are still factors and situations, which lead to discrimination or marginalinalization or certain groups.
- **International context**: structural adjustment agreements with IMF, World Bank or EU.

In relation with all these factors, we have to take into account that in case of rroma, their families are, usually, two times numerous than the rest of population. Many of them do not have identity papers and appropriate living conditions. The school attendance among young rroma is a real problem, since only approximately 60% of children aged 7-10 are attending school on a regularly basis.

In order to diminish the social exclusion of rroma, specific educational strategy for rroma population has been designed and started to be implemented. Strategy measures undertaken and with a favourable impact refer to:

- Affirmative actions for the promotion of young rroma in faculties and university colleges in order to develop a young rroma intellectuality;
- Setting up of a rromani language and literature department within the University of Bucharest;
- Stimulation of rromani language teaching and learning in pre-university education, as well as history and traditions of rroma people;
- Elaboration of curricula and textbooks for rromani language and for the history and traditions of rroma;
- Organization of special rroma teacher training programs;
- Appointment of a school inspector in charge with education of rroma in each school inspectorate;
- Provision of places in camps of intercultural education;
- Cooperation of Ministry of Education with different rroma NGOs in order to increase the school enrolment rate of rroma pupils.

3. Schools against social exclusion: the *Second Chance Programme*

One of the important initiatives of fighting social exclusion is the National Programme "Education for the Second Chance". This program started as a pilot in schools situated in rroma communities and then, because of the positive results, the Ministry of Education decided to generalize it to national level. The programme is addressed to the following target groups:

- school-age population who has never attended the school;
- school-age population who abandoned the compulsory education;
- school-age population who has not continued the post-compulsory education;
- unemployed people aged 14-25;
- people of more than 25 years old who have not completed their compulsory education or whose initial training became redundant for the training needs of the social and economic development at local level.

It is a programme, which aims to contribute to the building-up and strengthening of social and economic cohesion as well as an instrument of fight against marginalisation and social exclusion. Social and professional integration programmes should complement its specific measures.

The legal and institutional framework for this kind of actions was recently adopted. Therefore, one may rightly consider that Romania is lacking tradition in the implementation of educational policies specifically targeted against exclusion. As well, there are no impact studies with national relevance. Intervention to date fall rather under a piloting and experimentation effort.

4. School development in rroma communities

An other important effort in the last years, which tried to improve the above mentioned situation was the program *School development in rroma communities – Equal chances for rroma children through school and school-related activities*, co-financed by Center Education 2000+ (NGO, member of Soros Open Network) and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (through MATRA program). The project started in 1998 and lasted for three years; 12 schools were initially involved and, after the first year, the number increased to 28. All the schools were situated in rural or urban

communities with a large number of rroma, experiencing difficulties in the process of participation to education.

The main goals of the program were:

a) To fight against discrimination of rroma, reducing the drawbacks they had in comparison with the majority population and facilitating their access to education;
b) To support different ways of construction and manifestation of rroma identity;
c) To promote intercultural dialogue.

In order to accomplish these goals, the program was structured in six components:

1. *School management and partnership*, focused on strategic planning, development of school – community partnership, adaptation of curriculum and managerial style to the specific needs of intercultural groups. The schools produced school development plans, involving in the proposed activities the public institutions active at local level, the parents, the pupils etc. In the three years of the project they tried to transform schools in community resource centers, in which all the pupils and parents, regardless the socio-cultural or ethic group they belong, can find their place and can play a role in the school life. The mission of all schools involved was to contribute to the participation of all pupils and to support social cohesion at community level.
2. *Intercultural education* component aimed to raise the awareness of actors involved in educational process that differences among people has to be seen as resources and not as barriers in working together. The main activities were focused on teacher training and development of learning materials for intercultural education. This component served as a tool to "discover" the cultural and social identity of different groups, and especially of rroma. The discrimination and marginalization of rroma people is generated, most of the time, by insufficient of wrong knowledge about this group.
3. *Cooperative learning* component came with new and modern methodologies of working in the classroom. Through the cooperative learning activities a friendly climate has been developed and the participation of rroma pupils to school and extracurricular activities significantly increased. The classrooms and the schools were re-designed, re-decorated in order to allow all the students to express themselves and to have equal access to educational resources.
4. *Oral histories* component focused on the study and use of folklore, traditions and stories in educational process. Oral histories collected by students through interviews with people from local community came to show important aspect of everyday life and culture of people living in the neighborhood. Local heroes and exemplary situation were discovered by students and used as instruments for better knowing each other. As a rroma parent mentioned, "We would very much like our children to know who we are and where we came from...".
5. *Remedial teaching* offered individualized assistance and counseling to students being in situations of educational risk (tendency to school failure, drop-outs etc.). Mentoring students tried not only to improve their basic competencies (reading, writing, counting etc.), but also to prevent school abandonment and to recover and integrate pupils with adaptation difficulties to school environment.
6. *Involvement of local community in education – parents' education* was the component with a very important contribution from the pint of view of our topic. The main aim was to improve the communication and relationship between school, family and pupils. Social exclusion of rroma is very often generated by the early abandonment of educational system and the effects produced by this fact: illiteracy, lack of qualification, low capacity for social integration. Through this component the rroma parents, together with the others parents, were invited to take an active part in school life. In this way they can introduce their culture, their expectations and needs in the school activities and they can get appropriate knowledge about the role of school and education in youth life, about the ways in which they can support their own children to have better achievements.

5. Successful experiences: the impact of adult learning on pupils development

In the frame of the project *School Development in Rroma Communities*... there were several successful experiences regarding the positive effects of adult learning on development and achievements of pupils. The involvement of parents in school life, in different learning opportunities and context was a priority for the programme. During the project the fact that school attendance and educational success of students is highly dependent on parents involvement became very clear.

a) Sunday school for parents is an initiative of a primary school situated in rural area. Together with the Village Hall and local church, the school organized literacy courses for the illiterate rroma parents. Organized in week-ends, on a voluntary basis participation, the school for parents has been very well perceived by rroma parents. They wanted to learn to read and write in order to assist their pupils in learning, but also for everyday life purposes. Together with the literacy courses, those meetings were an excellent opportunity to bring together important actors in educational process: teachers, parents, representatives of local institutions. Together with the literacy courses, there were discussion about the religion with the priest, about children health wih the doctor, about local administration with the mair, about rule of law with the police officer etc. This experience was not only about learning for litercay, but also about learning to live together. This was a sustainable achievement of the program for the whole community, but especially for the future of the rroma children: they have now a strong support for their parents in learning activities and in their socail and cultural integration in the community.

b) Gradfathers' kindergarten is a generic name for educational activities organized initialy by older people in the community in order to provide pre-school pupils with the necessary pre-requisites for a successful integration in school environment. Then , parents started to participate also in this kind of activities. The focus was on:

- instructional activities (drawing, reading stories, visiting school, meeting the further teacher, operating with educational materials etc.);
- social contacts (involvement of parents of future students in social and cultural events organized by school or by the other parents);
- information activities for parents and future students (formal aspects reagrding registration to school, structure of school activities, duration and structure of a school day etc.). This was a good opportunity to know family's expectations from the education of their child/children.

c) Mentoring programmes were designed and, together with the teachers, parents and youth with upper secondary education completed were selected to be trained as mentors. Rroma parents and youth from the community participated in special designed training programmes in order to become mentors for the student with learning difficulties. One to one remedial teaching activities were held by parents under the supervision and coordination of teachers, in the community. This initiave produced an unexpected enthusiasm among 'new metors', which feel valued and important for the future of their young pupils. They built impressive portfolios of their work and, what is the most important, almost all mentored students managed to pass in the next grade and some of them had very high performances.

We presented here only three successful experiences in which the learning opportuniti8es offered to adults produced significant results for the pupils. More attention should be paied to the wider benefits of adult learning in the context of marginalisation and social exclusion. The educational integration and success of rroma pupils is highly dependent on families' pozitive attitudes towards education and the capacity of parents to support the efforts of their children.

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